AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN THE SHADOW OF THE OAK

We Glad Oonuh Come Fa See We

Gullah Greeting, "We Are Glad You Came to See Us"

The live oaks that shadowed this area of what is now Chatham County stood over a village that African Americans called home from the 1820s through the early 1900s.

During those 80 years, residents faced plantation bondage, the Civil War, and afterwards freedom and its challenges. Over the decades, African Americans in this community continued many cultural traditions from their various African ancestral homelands. They also merged these traditions and adapted them to Georgia's coastal environment, contributing to the unique Gullah Geechee culture of this area.

WHAT WAS HOME LIKE?

Gullah Geechee artifacts identified by archaeologists at the village site included items representing work activities, spiritual and dietary practices, and house/yard arrangement. A few examples reflect village life.

Various buttons were excavated. These bone buttons were very used and one had holes so worn that it could no longer be attached to clothing. African Americans here spent time sewing their own clothes. Pins, a thimble, and a lead bale seal used to secure a bolt of cloth testify to sewing activity. Spirituality was visible in two items. One was a pierced silver 1831 Mexican coin most likely worn as a protective charm. A metal hinge scratched with an "X" was found in the village. The Bakongo people of Africa used an "X" to represent religious concepts about power and the living and dead. An iron animal trap shows that African Americans supplemented the beef in their diet with wild game.

LIFE IN THE VILLAGE

Other information about village life lies beyond artifacts. Archaeologists uncovered a rectangular trench that enslaved villagers dug to make a foundation for a traditional African house at their village site in Georgia. The photo below shows what the house may have looked like had it survived. Most enslaved African Americans were not allowed to use the traditional architecture of their homeland.

HOW DID THE VILLAGE GET DISCOVERED?

This village site was discovered by Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) archaeologists in advance of a road improvement project on State Route (SR) 204 in Chatham County. This project proposed the reconstruction of an interchange with King George Boulevard and received federal funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) making it subject to review under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). Section 106 of the NHPA requires that significant historic properties, such as this village site, are properly considered for avoidance during project planning, and if they cannot be avoided, damage to these properties must be mitigated.

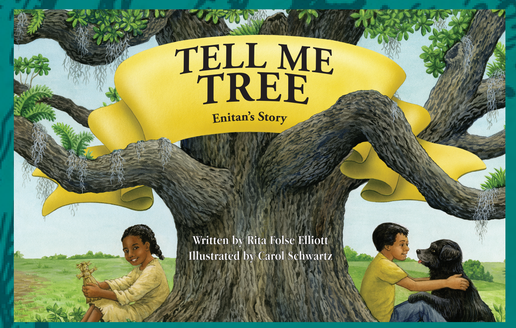
REFERENCES ARE AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.

WHAT IS MITIGATION?

For archaeology, mitigation often means a large excavation called 'data recovery,' but GDOT and FHWA wanted to go beyond merely following the law and having archaeologists excavate large portions of the site and write a detailed report about discoveries. They also wanted to innovatively bring new information about this important part of history to as large an audience as possible, in as many ways as possible. They did this by contracting with New South Associates to excavate the site, give public tours, conduct social media outreach, create a children's book, preserve site trees, and develop a curriculum.

TOURS

More than 1,000 visitors participated in interactive 90-minute tours of the 20-acre site over a period of two months. Tuesday through Saturday tours provided seven unique stops around the site, which changed throughout the field work. Tours offered visitors, from children through policy makers, a chance to see archaeologists uncovering the village and to learn how scientific procedures contribute to a greater understanding of the African American history not told in books. Hands-on activities were included in the tours, particularly with student fieldtrip Round Robins and the use of the Society for Georgia Archaeology's ArchaeoBus.



TREES

The ancient live oak tree in the children's book is the largest of multiple live oaks that were on the site during the village's history and are still alive in the 21st century. These trees are part of the cultural landscape. They were protected by GDOT/FHWA, who ensured that construction activities avoided the trees and their roots. The agencies also had the trees recognized as "Landmark and Historic Trees" and listed on the tree registry of the Georgia Urban Forest Council.

CHILDREN'S BOOK

Telling the story of the African American village and its discovery, beyond the archaeology report, was an important mitigation task. GDOT/FHWA decided to meet this challenge with a historical fiction children's book. Tell Me Tree is a colorful flip-book created to tell the African American story through a young girl named Enitan, who grew up in the village. The flip side tells how Vicenté, the son of an archaeologist, helps uncover the story of Enitan and her village. The 300-year old oak tree that still stands on the site unites the two stories. The book was distributed to public libraries and schools throughout the Chatham County, Georgia area and is available digitally at no charge on the internet. (http://www.abercornarchaeology.org/book.html)

Archaeology Under the Live Oaks:
A 4th Grade Multidisciplinary Curriculum

PROJECT CURRICULUM

Another educational component instituted by the project took the form of a curriculum aimed at 4th grade students. The curriculum uses the information about the African American village site and its archaeology for multi disciplinary activities. These activities teach Georgia education standards and higher-order thinking skills. The curriculum addresses various learning styles and provides educators with additional resource information. The curriculum was distributed to educators throughout the Savannah area and is available digitally at no cost on the internet.(http://www.abercornarchaeology.org/curriculum.html)

SUCCESS!

Mitigation efforts were both creative and successful. The history of the African American village was uncovered, documented, saved in various ways, and shared with thousands of people who would otherwise never have learned about it. The story endures in the outreach materials and continues to be studied by Gullah Geechee history and archaeology scholars, contributing to a more inclusive history.

GDOT
Georgia Department of Transportation

NEW SOUTH ASSOCIATES